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IV. Obedience at the Service of Mission

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3.4.2 At Community Level

- What means has the community adopted to put a covenant relationship in place among the members?
- What process of reconciliation do we put in place to help confreres resolve differences?
- How are the bonds between community superiors and other confreres lived?

3.4.3 At Circumscription Level

- Has the circumscription put in place opportunities for listening to confreres when some individuals are experiencing pain in their relationship with other confreres?
- What is the circumscription doing to promote a sense of belonging to the Congregation and to combat individualism?
- How does the circumscription show its solidarity in a concrete way with confreres who have received particularly difficult appointments?

IV. OBEDIENCE AT THE SERVICE OF MISSION

4.1 THE MISSION THAT HAS BEEN RECEIVED AND PERSONAL PROJECTS

*T*he response to the call that one has heard thrives in the willingness to serve and becomes concrete in the definitive commitment of the Spiritan. It goes without saying that this response needs to be refreshed regularly. The events of life and unexpected happenings mount up to challenge our willingness. And we must make mention too of personal projects. How often has it been observed that confreres show lit-

the enthusiasm for their missionary involvement because they have carefully elaborated a plan to undertake further studies or again, other confreres who begin a particular work without seeking the advice of their superior and even of their confreres! Before very long, their personal projects come into conflict with the community project and the project of the circumscription.

These personal projects are not necessarily negative. Each one of us has some and we are not to be considered any the less for all that. But that does not mean that we will be able to make them concrete. The question should always be asked: Is this realistic? How does one particular project integrate itself in the global project? Can it be harmonised with the mission one has received or with the Spiritan charism? The problem arises when one individual's project becomes his obsession and a priority that is imposed on everyone, with no discussion possible.

4.2 MARY'S 'YES'

Mary, the servant of the Lord, can guide us in our reflection. The Annunciation summarises the essential aspects of her availability to serve. Certainly, the message of the angel throws Mary's own personal plans into disarray but Mary understands that this message has to do with a call and a mission – to welcome Jesus within her so that the world might welcome the Son of God. In the infancy narratives the missionary aim of their authors appears. Mary herself has contributed to them. It was not for nothing that Libermann proposed the heart of Mary as a model for the members of his infant congregation. "We consider the heart of Mary as a per-

fect model of apostolic zeal”²⁸ At the end of the episode Mary makes clear beyond any doubt her willingness to serve: “I am the handmaid of the Lord” (Lk 1, 38).

What follows in the Gospel indicates how she had to adjust her availability continually as events unfolded. She learned to draw from them a deep meaning (Lk 2.51), to find her joy in listening to the word of God without coming between her Son and those who were listening to him (Lk 8,21). Neither did she seek to keep him for herself, because Jesus was the bearer of Good News for all. In Mary, availability and renunciation went hand in hand making it possible for God’s action to take place in people’s hearts.

Nor should it surprise us that we find Mary at the beginning of the Acts of the Apostles (Ac 1, 14). She shows the same availability to accompany the infant Church in prayer just as she had accepted the mission of accompanying Jesus, bringing him to meet his brothers and sisters in their quest for the salvation of God.

4.3 PASSION FOR MISSION

*T*he vow of obedience opens us to being available for the mission which Jesus has entrusted to his Church.

Availability for the Mission We Have Received

In our Spiritan life, the personal commitment of the profession of vows is matched by a passion for mission. “Without reference to obedience, the very term mission becomes very

²⁸ Provisional Rule, Part I, chapter II, article III, ND II, p. 238.

difficult to understand.”²⁹ This mission is received or it is confirmed for us (SRL 77.1). It implies a two-fold attitude.

- On one hand, each one becomes involved in revealing Christ. It frequently happens that some confreres let themselves become intoxicated by the success of their apostolate. Their initiatives win acceptance and people become dependent on them. Without knowing it, the confrere in question moves into the centre and prevents people from personally meeting Christ.
- Spiritans make themselves available to undertake to listen to and to serve the people to whom that have been sent. “I have come to serve and not to be served” (Mk 10, 41-44). In a very few words, Jesus sums up his own mission where he claims nothing for himself. We learn from his own way of living out his mission that obedience results in service. This example is specially recommended to superiors and it invites us to develop an attitude of humility and to reject all desire for power.

To Be Appointed To Mission

The willingness to serve finds its expression in the way our mission appointment is accepted. This is a crucial moment which is the result of a process in which many different partners are involved:

- Superiors, working with those who hold positions of responsibility in the local Church or in particular works, have to seek the good of the mission and of the confreres;
- Communities that seek to be reinforced expect a lot from new arrivals;

²⁹ *The Service of Authority and Obedience*, no. 23.

- The confreres themselves with their own individual story, their good will, their personal talents but also with their own needs and limitations.

Long gone are the days where Spiritans received their “obedience” on the day of their Final Profession or else learned of a change of appointment from their superior without the latter taking the time to dialogue with them. Times have changed and no one is complaining! However, we still hold that an appointment as “obedience” comes from religious obedience.

Nowadays an appointment involves a dialogue and a reflection to ensure that the individual concerned will be able to measure up to what is expected of him. In the final analysis it falls to him to accept the mission entrusted to him as if it came of itself. The exercise becomes more difficult in so far as it is considered as an administrative act. Only when it is seen at the spiritual level does it really become “obedience” when making oneself available interiorises the administrative act which is the formal conclusion of the process. Moreover, this spiritual dimension has value not only for the confrere who is appointed, but also for the superior and council who make the appointment and the community which receives the confrere. The “*paratus ad omnia*” is no more than a slogan with a false resonance unless it is lived by all as a spiritual adventure.

To Become Part of a Missionary Project

Obedience is played out in the daily life of a community and of an entire circumscription. A new challenge has been launched. The newly-appointed confrere on his arrival meets a group or a community with its own history, its joys and its difficulties. Much is expected of him and he is asked to share the common vision of the group and to adopt its point of

view, without sometimes realising that a certain period of time is required for him to get the measure of things.

It is impossible to receive an appointment without manifesting one's deep solidarity with the group. There is much more involved here than a normal psychological process. When SRL 159 declares "the confrere who is appointed to a circumscription becomes a member of it", it opens a new page of history in which a break with the past, attentive listening to the confreres and an understanding of what has been lived down through the years are all involved. It is a question of an obedience that is both enlightened and enriched by the common experience. It is conditioned by the way in which the confreres each share their own story. It will become transformed into a willingness to serve and an availability both of which give life to the common missionary project.

Thus are the outlines of co-responsibility in the received mission sketched out. Since the mission is much wider than his own particular preference or his own ambitions, the Spiritan takes on with dedication and a sense of responsibility what has been entrusted to him. But we must recognise that our discussions on obedience sometimes seem to be couched in very wooden language. "They talk but they do not act" (Mt 23, 3-4)! Our existing societies do not call only competent individuals but they wish that they might be complementary. However, if an individual does not shoulder his area of responsibility not only does he lose the confidence of the others but he also endangers the work of all.

How many community and chapter decisions are there that have remained dead letters because they do not arouse any sense of making oneself available in confreres or else each confrere has no concern for the common project? We are called therefore to be coherent both as individuals and as

groups in what we have promised to live, even when events or orientations contradict one's personal point of view. The quality of this kind of obedience, marked by co-responsibility, becomes therefore a renewed call to availability and to a willingness to serve.

4.4 SO WHERE ARE WE AT?

4.4.1 At a Personal Level

- Do I make myself available to the requests of Superiors when a response to new or urgent needs is called for?
- Am I available for the missionary priorities of the Congregation?
- Do I submit my own projects to the discernment of others and do I accept this discernment?
- How do I personally account for my own initiatives and projects?

4.4.2 At Community Level

- Is there a feeling of co-responsibility at the heart of the community? How does the community foster this?
- Do confreres have the opportunity to share what they are doing? In what way?
- Does the community update its mission project in line with what is happening on the ground? Does it submit this to the Superior of the circumscription?

4.4.3 At Circumscription Level

- Following the circumscription chapter, what mechanism permits the missionary project that has been decided upon to be put into action?
- How does the council of the circumscription prepare the appointments of confreres? What form does the preliminary dialogue take and what follow-up is there?
- What are the major decisions of the circumscription by which it expresses its desire to place itself at the service of people? Are these decisions followed by action?
- Has the circumscription reflected on the reasons which have led certain confreres to abandon their mission without reference to anyone?